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TAGS: PGOV TU US

SUBJECT: TURKISH REACTIONS TO POLITICAL CRISIS

REF: ANKARA 1083 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson for reasons 1.4(b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Conversations with two advisors to PM Erdogan, two former leaders on the left, an influential Ankara business figure, and three key journalists portray a range of views regarding Turkey's ongoing political turmoil and where it may lead.

-- The ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) push for a constitutional amendment to provide for direct election of the president is either a vehicle to position the party on the side of democracy or a risky provocation of the military.

It is also dividing the party, to the point of disarray among the rank and file and confusion among the leadership.

-- Although it may be drawing about 35 percent in current opinion polls, AKP's prospects for winning more than a slim majority of seats in the next parliament are uncertain. Some see a shift in the political landscape that could leave AKP out of government, but others speculate that the Turkish military may prefer a weak AKP in government to one in the opposition.

-- Prospects for forming a new party of the center-left have dropped to zero given that elections have been moved up, but it remains to be seen whether opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Baykal, deeply distrusted and disliked even within his own party, can garner significantly more votes than in 2002.

-- AKP is seen as and feels itself "abandoned" by the US despite fairly close partnership over the last several years and despite strident anti-Americanism among CHP leaders.

-- Big business remains remarkably confident, but economic pressures on the lower middle class and poor are producing an alarming rise in support for the demagogue Cem Uzan, leader of the Genc (Youth) Party. End summary.

Erdogan Advisors

¶2. (C) In our and other Western embassies' discussions with PM Erdogan advisors, one message that comes through is confusion and division within AKP. A large block of moderates hoped and expected Erdogan would nominate MOD Gonul or a similar, non-controversial figure as president. PM advisor and MP Saban Disli told us May 4 that most of this group saw the Constitutional Court decision as a face-saving way to tack back, and they have urged Erdogan to turn away

from further confrontation that might prove costly at the polls and/or with the military. Disli expressed dismay that AKP firebrands seemed determined to push ahead immediately with a referendum on direct election of the president. He said that these AKP figures had failed to read or understand the April 27 TGS statement. He was urging caution on Erdogan and hoping others will do so, too.

¶13. (C) Another MP and Erdogan advisor Egemen Bagis, speaking with us May 3, was more upbeat. He pitched the direct election issue through the prism of domestic politics. He regarded advocacy for this issue, and a possible referendum on it simultaneous with the parliamentary elections in July, as winners for the AKP and a loser for CHP. He dismissed any possibility that it could be provocative -- and then complained (as he has several times) that what he regards as tepid USG statements on Turkish democracy, especially in the wake of the TGS statement, have imperiled Turkey. Bagis did concede that President Sezer is unlikely to allow this kind of constitutional amendment to be enacted without a big fight, and he seemed almost to relish that fight.

¶14. (C) Bagis recounted his conversation later on May 3 with Land Forces Commander Gen. Basbug to a European diplomat. Bagis reportedly asked what the military will do if AKP wins 367 seats (the quorum to elect a president) in the parliamentary voting. Gen. Basbug reportedly replied, "If you get 367 seats, come and ask me then." If this meeting was designed to ease AKP/TGS tension, it failed, but it may have helped set up Erdogan's own, several hour discussion with TGS CHOD Gen. Buyukanit last weekend.

Former Leaders on the Left

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¶15. (C) Former parliamentary speaker and foreign minister Hikmet Cetin and the leader of the small opposition Social Democrat People's Party (SHP) Murat Karayalcin provided alternative views on May 7 and 9, respectively. Cetin was unimpressed with the developing partnership of CHP with the late Bulent Ecevit's Democratic Left Party (DSP); said he expects CHP leader Baykal's dictatorial ways will make this alliance short-lived, and did not believe it will add to the opposition vote anyway. He remarked that just because True Path Party (DYP) and Motherland Party (ANAP) have commanded 8 and 4 percent respectively in the polls, one should not assume that their merged party will get 12 percent or even surmount the 10 percent threshold. Cetin has, since the fall of 2006, flirted with various figures on the left and center about leading a new party, but the snap call for parliamentary elections has now overtaken that plan.

¶16. (C) Cetin said MOD Gonul confirmed to him that Erdogan had asked that he be AKP's presidential candidate -- until Speaker Arinc objected. Arinc played a similar game several years ago in axing an Erdogan-backed bid by Gonul to succeed him as speaker. Cetin acknowledged that the prime minister's insistence this time on Gonul could have split the party, but said Erdogan should have recognized the dangers posed by a possible military reaction and shown stronger leadership. Cetin regretted the TGS statement and called patently improper the Court decision on the 367 seat quorum, but remarked that Turkey is what it is. AKP, he said, has never done an effective job of working with the military, the academic community and other secular bastions, and now it is paying the price.

¶17. (C) Karayalcin, whose party scored in very low single digits in 2002 and has not risen a bit since, was understandably depressed about the Turkish political scene and his prospects in it. He said SHP is broke and unlikely to compete in the July voting. Talk about a possible alliance with CHP foundered because Baykal wanted a wholesale acquisition that Karayalcin could not stomach. He said DSP has a better chance with Baykal because it has money; it

earns USD 1 million a month in interest alone. Karayalcin had been aware of Cetin's efforts. He said their failure shows poor judgment on the part of Cetin (a previous SHP leader). Asked about the presidential sweepstakes, he predicted a very protracted battle within the parliament over the proposed amendments on direct election that could last till the end of 2007.

Business View

¶ 8. (C) Coskun Ulusoy, director general of the military pension fund Oyak who is also active in other business fields, regarded Erdogan's tactics as mistaken, but expressed remarkable confidence in Turkish economic policy. Speaking with us on May 8, Ulusoy did not expect domestic turmoil to have much economic impact. The markets had dipped right after the TGS statement, but have been strong since. Ulusoy claimed to have met a European group a couple of days earlier that was interested in buying into a bank Ulusoy controls, and he sees no diminution of foreign interest given Turkey's size and dynamism. He said that no new government "will dare to make a mistake" and jeopardize Turkey's hard-won macroeconomic stability -- though he acknowledged that most governments do not consciously set out to make mistakes.

¶ 9. (C) Ulusoy did notice one fly in the ointment. While big business is doing well, small enterprises are not, and lower middle class and poor voters are feeling increasingly squeezed, he maintained. One result is rising interest in Cem Uzan, the corrupt Genc Party leader who is making wild, demagogic promises (e.g., "I'll lower the price of gasoline by two-thirds to 1 Turkish lira to the liter"). Ulusoy and others have noted that Uzan is now parodied as promising to reduce women's term of pregnancy by two-thirds to only three months, too.

Over Analysis by Turkish Journalists

¶ 10. (C) Speaking as a group with us on May 8, columnists Murat Yetkin and Cengiz Candar and NTV commentator Murat Akgun took a very pessimistic view of where Erdogan has led his party and country. Yetkin observed that the key declarations Erdogan made only a month ago -- that the

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current parliament will elect the president, that this person will be an AK member, and that there will be no early election -- had all come a cropper.

¶ 11. (C) Yetkin had the same picture we received of squabbling among AKP factions over whether, when and how to push a constitutional amendment on direct presidential elections. He related on-the-record and diametrically opposite characterizations of the AKP's substantive goal for the presidency; government spokesman and just-resigned Justice Minister Cicek said Turkey will have a strong, executive president similar to the US; MP and deputy AKP leader Dengir Mir Firat said what Saban Disli also told us -- that the presidency will be emptied of all but ceremonial responsibility and be left "just like the Austrian presidency". Yetkin said he felt ashamed when two current AKP ministers asked him (Yetkin) whether there will be a coup; one joked that Yetkin should visit when he and the rest of the party leadership is packed off to prison by the military.

¶ 12. (C) Yetkin and Candar maintained that Erdogan is reeling from the presidency crisis he created, finds himself confused and unusually uncertain, and is facing a virtual revolt both from the hard-line Arinc wing and from liberal reformers who came to the AKP from secular parties and are alarmed about a possible return to 1980-style civilian confrontation with the military. We have heard the last ourselves, including from such figures as Parliament's International Affairs Commission chair Mehmet Dulger. The AKP's "aura of invincibility" has been broken, and now Erdogan faces the possibility of losses

in the parliamentary election. Akgun remarked that the AKP's failures to convey a simple message to the electorate and to get along with the established elite are now coming round to bite it.

¶13. (C) The journalists agreed that current polling suggests the most AKP can expect is 290 seats in the next parliament (276 forms a majority) -- if CHP gets about what it had in 2002, MHP just crosses the 10 percent threshold, and there are 20 Kurdish independents -- all totals that the journalists believe are low. The odds of a coalition government are high, and if the newly merged DYP-ANAP coalition becomes a fourth party in parliament, AKP could find itself out of office. Akgun believes that AKP in opposition will be more dangerous to the secularists and the military out of government than in it. They all agreed that the most likely scenario is a new parliament that is far more divided and unstable than the present one and more like those of the 1990s. It will be even more so if Uzan's Genc Party gets in.

¶14. (C) Having analyzed and speculated their way to an almost apocalyptic scenario for the AKP, Candar and Akgun said it is important not to lose sight of the AKP's advantages. Unlike any other party, it does fantastic grassroots work. It has a remarkable economic record to run on. It is disciplined, but not dictatorial like Baykal's CHP, and both incumbency and a relatively open character attract those put off by other parties. And while it can count on only 30-35 percent of the voters, the rest of the electorate is deeply divided for a variety of ideological, substantive and personal reasons. Hatred of Baykal among many is also a factor; CHP could perhaps garner as much as 25 percent or even more if a more popular figure headed it. Candar and Yetkin speculated that the only thing worse than a deeply divided parliament is one where AKP wins even more seats than it has now -- a possibility that none of the journalists dismissed. They feared the military's reaction.

¶15. (C) Asked about US-Turkish relations, the journalists said it is folly to pay too much attention to the stridently anti-US, anti-EU and anti-Western rhetoric of the CHP leadership. The secularist movement is strongly pro-US and pro-West, though many have soured on the EU as the EU has soured on Turkey, and Iraq/PKK concerns loom large over secularist views of the US, too. If CHP enters government, it will seek rapprochement with the US. Candar, who claims to be a personal friend of FM Gul, said that AKP in general and Gul in particular are deeply disappointed with and feel "abandoned" by the US.

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